

TELEMASP BULLETIN

TEXAS LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE STATISTICS PROGRAM

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Auto Theft Enforcement

Introduction

According to the Uniform Crime Reports, the number of automobile thefts increased from 991,611 in 1978 to more than 1.7 million in 1991. Statistics also indicate that in 1990 one out of every twelve vehicles was stolen, costing Americans an estimated \$8 billion. Like many states, Texas has also experienced a dramatic increase in the number of auto thefts in the past decade, growing from 83,000 cases in 1980 to over 163,000 in 1991 (Ethridge and Gonzalez 1996). Despite decreases since 1990, auto theft remains a significant problem. Car theft operations have grown increasingly complex, often spanning both interstate and international boundaries. Since the late 1960s many states have begun to realize that traditional methods of confronting auto theft can no longer keep pace with organized auto theft rings. These conditions have forced law enforcement agencies to reformulate their strategies and form more cooperative networks designed to combat today's auto thieves.

Purpose

This bulletin examines the role of both individual agency auto theft units and interjurisdictional task forces in fighting auto theft. The structure, recruitment, and activities of task force members are discussed as well as the impact they have had upon car theft activities. Responses are based on survey results from 32 law enforcement agencies in the state. The survey consisted of three sections. Section one sought to gain a basic overview of the auto theft problem facing each agency, and sections two and three dealt with task forces and auto theft units, respectively.

For purposes of the survey, an auto theft *task force* was defined as "a multi-jurisdictional entity funded in whole or

part by the Texas Auto Theft Prevention Authority (ATPA)." An auto theft *unit* was defined as "a designated entity or person(s) assigned special responsibility for auto theft enforcement."

Analysis

Of the 32 participating agencies, 14 (44%) reported that their agency participated in an auto theft task force, and 23 (72%) agencies reported having an auto theft unit. Auto theft units are not a new phenomenon (e.g., the Dallas Police Department formed one in 1919). However, auto theft task forces are relatively new. Table 1 lists the departments that reported a task force and auto theft unit and the initial year of formation. Nearly 86 percent of the agencies participating in a task force were formed since 1992, and almost 93 percent began participation since 1991. The only exception was the Houston Police Department, which began participation in 1986.

The El Paso Police Department and the El Paso County Sheriff's Department make up the El Paso County Auto Theft Prevention Task Force. It began with nine members and focused on theft site surveillance based upon crime statistics. Through success, the task force has grown to 32 members and has incorporated a salvage inspection unit which routinely conducts inspections of salvage yards, auto repair shops, and car dealers. The task force also investigates any cases suspected to be associated with organized rings and employs two full-time auto theft prevention personnel. Task force members train auto theft personnel within various departments, and a program is currently being developed to target known auto crimes offenders.



Table 1

Year of Formation	
Year	Agency
Auto Theft Units	
1919	Dallas
1930	Houston
1950	San Antonio
1957	Wichita Falls
1968	Garland
1970	Fort Worth
	Irving
1972	Department of Public Safety
1980	Arlington
	North Richland Hills
1987	Plano
1988	Pasadena
1990	Carrollton
1991	Midland
1992	Abilene
1993	Travis County
1994	Addison
Auto Theft Task Forces	
1986	Houston
1991	Arlington
1993	Dallas County
	Department of Public Safety
	El Paso
	Fort Worth
	Harris County
	Midland
	North Richland Hills
	Odessa
	San Antonio
	White Settlement
1994	Dallas
1995	Texarkana

Traditionally, the number of reports received by police are used as a measure of the incidence of crime that occurs annually. However, the *actual* incidence of crime is much more difficult to determine and may exceed or fall below the number of reports that are made to police. All departments were asked to estimate what percentage of auto theft reports were cases in which an auto theft had actually taken place. Figure 1 shows that it was estimated that 57 percent of auto theft reports made to the responding agencies were "full theft." Thirty-one percent of all reports were actually cases of unauthorized use of the vehicle, and 12 percent of all reports were estimated to be unsubstantiated or false reports.

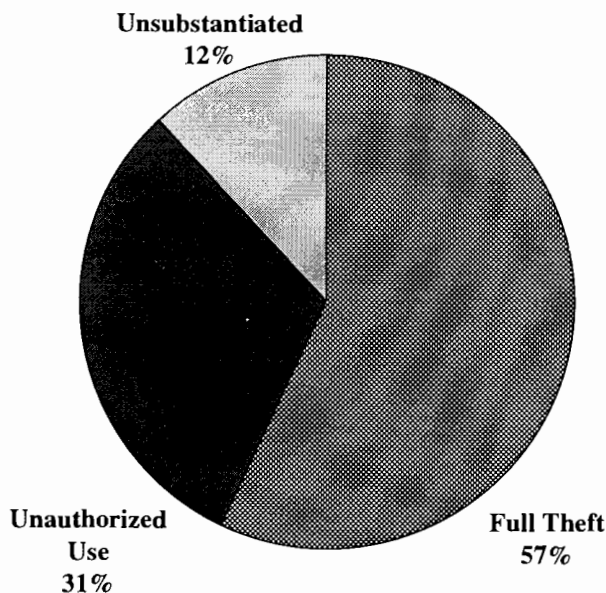


Figure 1

Source of Auto Theft Reports

Recruitment and Personnel

The survey included questions addressing officer recruitment. Of the 14 departments reporting task force participation, six (43%) recruited members from anywhere within the department, five departments (36%) reported recruiting from their auto theft division only, and three departments (21%) recruited task force officers from other specific units within the department.

The Irving Police Department cooperates with the Dallas County Auto Theft Task Force, local security companies, and area businesses to reduce auto theft and burglaries of vehicles in their community. Local dealers loan vehicles complete with kill switches for use as bait vehicles in malls, major hotels, and areas hit particularly hard by auto theft. In return, businesses host special events such as HEAT registrations, crime fairs, and storefronts.

Of the 23 departments reporting an auto theft unit, 11 (48%) recruited personnel from their detective division only. Nine departments (39%) reported recruiting their personnel from anywhere within the department, and three departments (13%) indicated that they recruited auto theft unit personnel from other units within the department. Task force and auto theft units employ varying numbers of personnel. Among task force agencies, while some employ only one individual,



Tarrant County Auto Theft Task Force

Arlington

Azle

Eules

Fort Worth

Grapevine

Haltom City

Hurst

*National
Insurance Crime
Bureau*

*North Richland
Hills*

Richland Hills

*Tarrant County
District Attorney*

*Tarrant County
Sheriff*

*Texas
Department of
Public Safety*

White Settlement

- An average of 182 stolen vehicles have been recovered by the Tarrant County Auto Theft Task Force each year.
- The Tarrant County Auto Theft Task Force has led the state in countywide auto theft reduction:

52%	1991-1992
33%	1992-1993
- The 14 agency Task Force is governed by a local Board of Governors consisting of nine members. The Tarrant County sheriff serves as chairman. No single agency has complete control over the other participants. The concept results in a very harmonious relationship.
- The Tarrant County Auto Theft Task Force actively pursues auto thieves, chop shops, and enforces the Salvage Dealer Law which regulates auto parts and repair businesses. These efforts help reduce the market for stolen vehicle parts.
- The Task Force is on call to provide auto theft-related assistance to other law enforcement agencies at all times.
- The Task Force is actively engaged in training of both the public and law enforcement officers.
- The Task Force includes the legal staff responsible for all prosecutions in the Tarrant County Auto Theft Impact Court, which is the only auto theft impact court in the world.
- The Task Force includes a National Insurance Crime Bureau agent who provides information access and coordination on a nationwide scale and a DPS officer who provides statewide information access and coordination.



the El Paso Police Department reported employing 30. Eight agencies (25%), however, assigned only one or two personnel to the task force. In contrast, agencies reported an even wider range of personnel to staff their auto theft units. Several agencies reported one and the Houston Police Department reported 104 auto theft personnel.

Auto theft task forces and auto theft units are similar in that both consist chiefly of full-time personnel. Only one agency (3%), the Dallas Police Department, made use of part-time task force personnel, and three agencies (9%) employed part-time auto theft unit personnel. Agencies that did utilize part-time personnel did so on a limited basis, using only one or two such persons.

The Midessa Metro Auto Theft Task Force, consisting of five personnel from the Midland and Odessa Police Departments and the Midland County Sheriff's Department, makes use of state and federal law enforcement agencies to assist them with personnel shortages. The task force covers a 17 county area and spends much of their time working with other agencies in the Permian Basin. They have had considerable success in recovering stolen vehicles taken to Mexico including the dismantling of two border theft rings.

Table 2 shows that nine task force agencies (28%) reported that their full-time personnel worked between 41 to 50 hours per week on task force duties only. Four task force agencies (13%) reported working 31 to 40 hours per week, and one agency (3%) reported that its task force members work 51 to 60 hours per week on such duties. Among auto theft unit

Table 2

Hours Per Week Spent on Auto Theft Duties

Hours	Task Forces (N=14)		Theft Units (N=23)	
	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time
0-20	-	-	3 (100%)	2 (9.5%)
21-30	-	-	-	2 (9.5%)
31-40	-	4 (29%)	-	12 (57.1%)
41-50	-	9 (64%)	-	5 (23.8%)
51-60	-	1 (7%)	-	-
TOTAL	0	14 (100%)	3 (100%)	21 (99.9%)*

*Actual percentages rounded to tenth.

agencies, 12 (38%) reported that 31 to 40 hours per week are spent on auto theft duties only. Five (16%) reported 41 to 50 hours and two agencies (6%) reported spending 21 to 30 and zero to 20 hours per week on auto theft duties only. All three departments that employed part-time auto theft unit personnel spent zero to 20 hours per week on auto theft duties only.

Training. Departments were asked about the amount of auto theft-specific training that task force officers and auto theft unit officers received. This section was divided into two parts, one addressing training received prior to assignment and the other addressing in-service training that officers receive following their assignment.

Task force personnel appear to receive more auto theft-specific training prior to their assignment than do auto theft unit personnel. Five of 11 task force departments (46%) responding to this item reported 40 hours or less of training prior to assignment, while 13 out of 20 auto theft departments (65%) indicated that the officers received that amount of training prior to assignment. Four of the 11 task force departments (36%) and five of the 20 auto theft unit departments (25%) reported 41 to 70 hours of training prior to assignment. Finally, two task force departments (18%) gave their officers 71 or more hours of training compared to two of 20 responding auto theft unit departments (10%). Caution is warranted whenever drawing conclusions based on small sample sizes, but it does appear that task force personnel receive more auto theft-specific training before assignment is made than do auto theft unit personnel.

Supervisory personnel. The division/unit and title of personnel in charge of task forces and auto theft units varied. Seven (54%) of 13 responding task force departments reported that the supervisor in charge resided within the criminal investigation division (CID). Five departments (39%) indicated that the supervisor resided within the auto theft/motor vehicle theft unit, and one department (8%) responded that its task force supervisor was within the covert operations unit. Among auto theft units, 12 (60%) out of 20 departments reported that the individual in charge resided within the CID. Three departments (15%) reported that their supervisor was within the auto theft unit, two departments (10%) indicated that their supervisor was within the detective division, another two departments (10%) indicated the patrol division, and one (5%) indicated the criminal law enforcement division.

Four out of 14 (29%) task force departments reported that the person in charge held the title of sergeant. This compares to 10 out of 23 (44%) auto theft units. Five task force departments (36%) reported that the person in charge held the title of lieutenant, compared to six (26%) departments with auto theft units. Captains were in charge of three (21%) task force departments, but only in one out of 23 auto theft units (4%). In addition, detectives were in charge of task forces in two out of 14 (14%) departments, and auto theft units in three out of 23 (13%) departments. In the case of the Department of Public Safety, a service commander supervises the auto theft unit. Finally, personnel in charge of the auto theft unit in two departments (9%) held the rank of patrol officer. Individuals placed in charge of a department's task force tended to rank

higher than those in charge of auto theft units. In summary, one in five task forces were led by those who held the rank of captain, whereas only one in 20 auto theft units were led by captains. A similar pattern is found in the case of lieutenants when comparing task forces to auto theft units. Slightly more than one in three task forces are led by lieutenants, whereas slightly more than one in four auto theft units are led by those holding this rank.

Enforcement Strategies

Both task forces and auto theft units employ similar methods to reduce auto theft. However, task forces use available techniques to a greater extent. Figure 2 shows 15 common methods of auto theft enforcement and the percentage of departments that report using them. For both task forces and

auto theft units, citizen tips rank as the most widely used method, employed by all responding task force and auto theft unit agencies. In addition to citizen tips, 100 percent of all responding task force agencies report utilizing three additional methods: informants, offender surveillance, and salvage yard checks. Only five of the 15 reported techniques were used by less than 70 percent of responding task forces. Two techniques, directed patrol and "other methods" (including salvage tracking, tips from beat officers, Crimestoppers programs, etc.) were more widely used among auto theft units than among task forces. "Public Information" includes a wide variety of responses such as seminars, presentations, lectures, community meetings, booths, and other public appearances. "Other Prevention Methods" includes responses such as informational displays and crime prevention units.

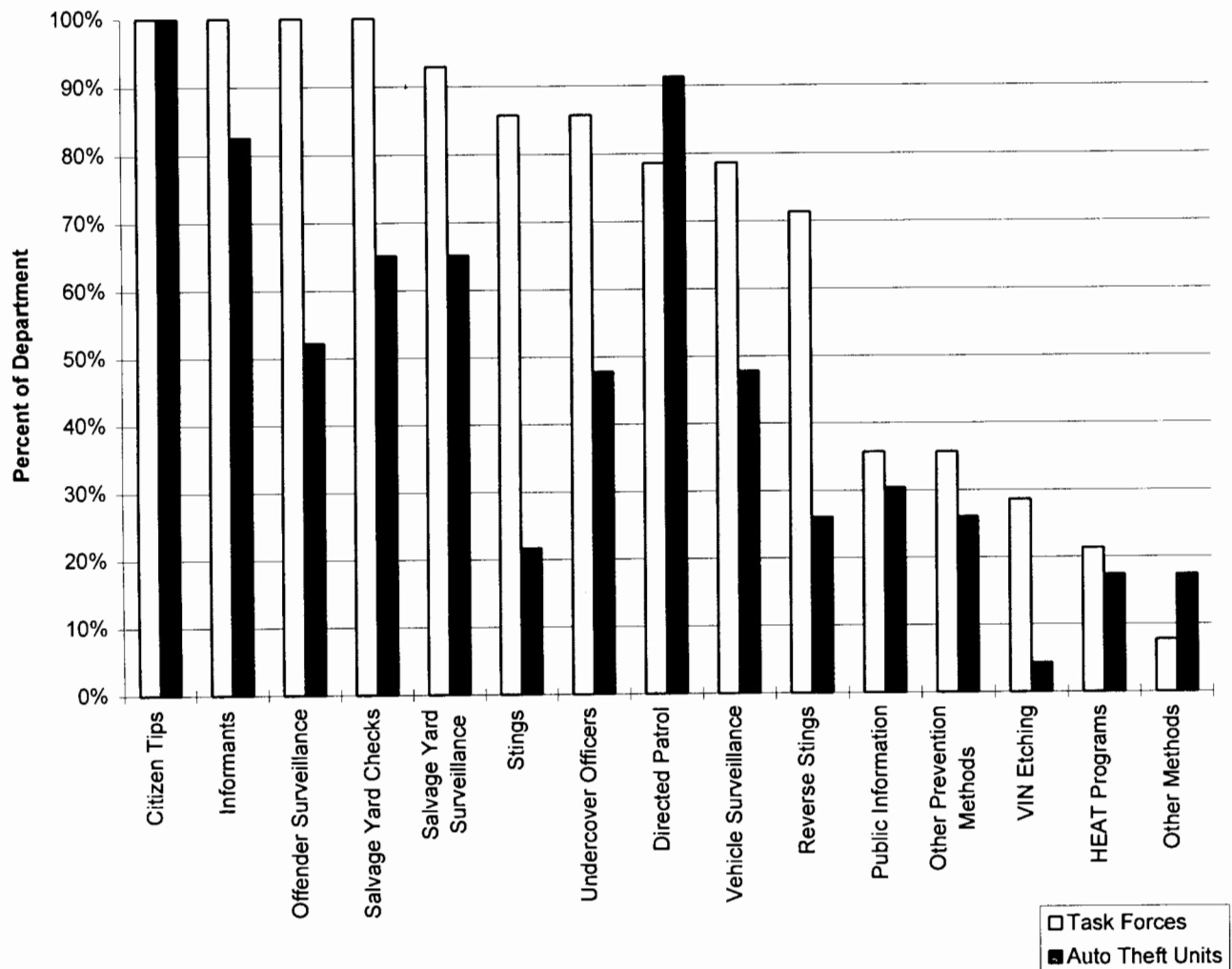


Figure 2

Enforcement Strategies

The Texarkana Auto Theft Task Force cooperates with other task forces and the Department of Public Safety to conduct inspections of car dealers, salvage yards, and body repair shops. Participants are able to learn by working with each other and discussing related experiences or unusual cases each may be handling. The formation of the task force has also enabled two detectives to concentrate solely on cases of auto theft and implementing prevention programs within the community.

The Workplace

Since task forces are multi-jurisdictional in nature, it seems plausible that task force activities would stretch beyond urban inner-city limits. Stolen vehicles may be transported to states where registration, titling and salvage laws are more relaxed and easier to circumvent. Theft rings may also be attracted to more secluded rural areas because record keeping practices may be less rigid, and salvage operators may find the added economic incentives difficult to refuse.

Task force and auto theft unit departments were asked what percentage of their respective activities took place in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The results did not strongly support the contentions above. Task force activities took place in urban areas 64 percent of the time, suburban areas 23 percent, and rural areas 13 percent of the time. In contrast, auto theft unit activities took place in urban areas 47 percent of the time, suburban areas 46 percent, and rural areas 7 percent of the time. Although task forces spent almost 6 percent more of their time in rural areas than did auto theft units, they also spent 17 percent more time in urban areas than did auto theft units. The largest difference was in suburban areas, where auto theft unit activities took place twice as often as did task force activities (23% compared to 46%). Thus, it appears that although task forces may spend slightly more time in rural areas than do auto theft units, they also spend more time than auto theft units in urban areas.

One possible explanation for these results could be that the larger law enforcement agencies in urban areas are more likely to encounter auto theft on a regular basis, and thus have a greater interest in establishing a formal auto theft task force than would smaller departments in less populated areas. Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that definitions of what constitutes "urban," "suburban," and "rural" areas were left up to the individual completing the survey. Hence, what one respondent perceived as "rural" may not have been what another respondent perceived as such, and these differing ideas would inevitably affect survey results.

Dimensions of Auto Theft: Task Forces vs. Auto Theft Units

Like most criminals, car thieves have varying motives for committing this offense. For some, gaining permanent possession of the vehicle for profit may be the primary objective. Car theft rings that specialize in selling black market parts or exporting whole autos to other countries would fall into this category. For others, stealing cars may not be the primary objective but rather a means to an end. Thieves who steal cars to commit other crimes, and "joyriders" who steal them for a temporary thrill are examples where possession of the car is sought for a temporary basis. Understanding what types of auto theft problems prevail in an area and the general motives that exist behind them is important to develop effective initiatives to combat this problem.

Items were included in the survey that sought to determine the predominant features of auto theft that both task forces and auto theft units face. Departments were asked what percentage of the stolen vehicles reported were recovered and what the general conditions of the vehicles were upon recovery. Table 3 shows that although differences in recovery rates and vehicle conditions exist between task forces and auto theft units, such differences appear minor and insignificant. The greatest difference is found in cases where autos are recovered with some parts missing. Approximately 15 percent of vehicles recovered by task forces fell into this category compared to 24 percent of vehicles recovered by auto theft units.

Table 3
Conditions of Vehicles Recovered

Conditions	Percent
by Task Forces	
Minor Damage	33%
Not Recovered	19%
No Damage	17%
Most Parts Missing	16%
Some Parts Missing	15%
by Auto Theft Units	
Minor Damage	28%
Some Parts Missing	24%
No Damage	23%
Not Recovered	17%
Most Parts Missing	8%



Departments were also asked to estimate what percentage of recovered vehicles were thought to have been used in the commission of other crimes. Responses varied widely, and no clear patterns emerged distinguishing task forces from auto theft units. Between 5 to 60 percent of cars recovered by task forces and between 1 to 40 percent of cars recovered by auto theft units were estimated to have been used in other crimes.

Conclusion

According to FBI statistics, the rate of auto theft in the United States increased nearly 50 percent from 1972 to 1992. During the same period, Texas' auto theft rates increased over 149 percent, almost tripling the increase in the national rate. Commercial auto theft operations pose new and difficult challenges to law enforcement, extending beyond jurisdictional confines. Texas' 900-mile border with Mexico, coupled with its proximity to several major metropolitan areas, ensures thieves both an abundant supply of autos and a relatively safe refuge from the law, either as a destination for stolen vehicles and their parts or to escape bail. Theft often occurs before owners realize that they have become victims. This situation poses unique obstacles for law enforcement, and if such operations are to be successfully dismantled, inter-agency cooperation is essential.

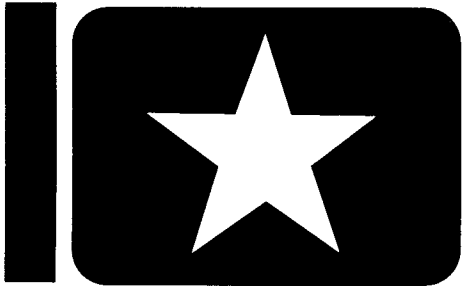
Since 1991, the Auto Theft Prevention Act has promoted the formation of auto theft task forces, pooling information, equipment, personnel, and other resources among jurisdictions already facing tight budgetary constraints. Confiscated funds have helped agencies purchase needed equipment and help defray the costs of establishing the task force. Cooperative multi-jurisdictional auto theft task forces can provide law enforcement agencies with a cost-effective method of auto theft enforcement and a valuable tool to combat this costly crime.

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- Ethridge, P.A., and R. Gonzalez. (1996). Combatting Vehicle Theft Along the Texas Border. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*. 65(1):10-13.

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